



Like any other new endeavour introduced into the Navy in the old days, the Ordnance Engineering Branch came under the control of the Gunnery Officer. Some other activities formerly managed by the Gunnery Officer were Music, Diving, Photography and Instructional Technique training.

Prior to 1919 maintenance of gun hydraulics and mechanics was performed by Armourers assisted by Armourer's Mates, the latter being unskilled ratings from the Seaman Branch. Armourers and Armourer's Mates were trained in Australian naval circles from 1881 at the Williamstown Naval Depot in the days of the Victorian State Navy, the Victorian Naval Forces. The first Ordnance Engineering Officer of the RAN, Lieutenant Commander George Prideaux MBE, RAN, joined the Victorian Naval Forces as an Armourer's Apprentice at the Williamstown Naval Depot in 1885. George's father had voyaged to Australia in 1867 as a Gunner in the three decker wooden walled Battleship HMVS NELSON which served in the Victorian Naval Forces until she was sold out of the service in 1898.

The Armourer Branch was disbanded in the Royal Navy shortly after World War I and the Royal Australian Navy followed suit. The Ordnance Engineering Branch was formed in 1919 and the rating of Armourer was changed to Ordnance Artificer. The unskilled ratings who assisted the Armourer were designated QO (Qualified Ordnance).

These early members of the branch were responsible to the Gunnery Officer for the mechanical maintenance of guns and mountings. The hydraulics maintenance of weapons systems, in those days, was carried out by Engine Room Artificers.

Lieutenant Commander Prideaux went to Flinders Naval Depot (HMAS CERBERUS) in 1920 when the Williamstown Naval Depot closed down and soon afterwards set up the Ordnance Engineering Section in HMAS CERBERUS. At the same time the first group of RAN Ordnance Artificers was formed, including some Engine Room Artificers, and began a programme of hydraulics training on board HMAS AUSTRALIA, the RAN's first Battle Cruiser.

In 1922, the first direct entry Ordnance Artificers were entered at HMAS CERBERUS as Ordnance Artificer Fifth Class, not having completed their civilian apprenticeships as Fitter and Turner. During the 1920's the Ordnance Artificers and QO Sailors were progressively trained to maintain not only the mechanical and hydraulic aspects of the gun mountings, but also Director and Fire Control systems, leading up to the commissioning in 1928-30 of the 8" County Class Cruisers (10,000 tons) HMAS AUSTRALIA and CANBERRA. The armament of those ships was somewhat complicated having four heavy hydraulically operated twin 8" turrets and fire control systems - all revolutionary to the RAN and somewhat a maintenance challenge to the infant Ordnance Branch.

In 1939, many direct entry OA and QO were entered for wartime service only in the RANR. Some WRANS were entered in the QO category. One of these, Mrs Mary Tanner MBE, is now the Victorian President of the Naval Association of Australia.

In July 1956 the first Ordnance Artificer Apprentices joined HMAS NIRIMBA.

These were:

F C Bradbury, K J Turner, R J Ruse, R Taylor, T P Lloyd, B L Donnell, K P Tyrell and G R Bailey. Donnell transferred to Engine Room Artificer Apprentice and Tyrell was discharged. Five of the remainder of the class graduated.

Ordnance Artificer training began in building 259 in the former aircraft engine maintenance hangar on the eastern side of HMAS NIRIMBA adjacent to the Richmond railway line. Marine Engineering training was also conducted in that building.



The first uniformed instructor of Ordnance Engineering in HMAS NIRIMBA was Lieutenant 'Rip' Gladding and the first civilian instructor was Mr A Robinson.

Between 1956 and 1962, when the branch structure of the Ordnance Artificer category was reviewed and altered dramatically, a total of 114 Ordnance Artificer apprentices entered HMAS NIRIMBA and of these, 86 graduated.

In 1962, following the lead of the Royal Navy, the Rating Structure Committee (RATSTRUC) recommended certain changes in personnel and training policies. The result of that committee's report on the Ordnance Branch was most dramatic - the branch was discontinued!

The training time for all NIRIMBA apprentices was reduced to three and one half years. Recognition for apprentices of the Ordnance category was formalised with the New South Wales Apprenticeship Commission. As a result of global negotiations affecting all technical categories, the categories of Systems Artificer Power and Weapons were introduced with the civilian equivalent of Electrical Fitter Power. Ordnance oriented apprentices were allocated to either Systems Artificer (Power) - the Power Electric stream - or to Systems Artificer (Weapons) - dedicated to Weapons hydraulics.

In the late 1960's a more comprehensive review of sailor branch structure and training was carried out and as a result of that committee's recommendations, the apprentices' training of these Systems Artificers Power or Weapons was reduced to two years. The titles of the categories were changed to Electrical Technical Power and Electrical Technical Weapons with graduates aspiring to the rank of Able Seaman instead of the former almost automatic promotion to Petty Officer status after a period of consolidation training in the Fleet.

Perhaps it may seem to be over simplifying the matter but the modern equivalent of an Ordnance Artificer is an Electrical Technical Weapons sailor.

Well remembered stalwarts of the old Ordnance Branch who instructed Ordnance Artificer Apprentices in HMAS NIRIMBA and who themselves came from the former direct entry stream of Ordnance Artificers were Chief Ordnance Artificers 'Moses' Crane, 'Tug' Wilson and Jim Cbristie.

Former apprentices of the Ordnance Artificer category in HMAS NIRIMBA who have been promoted to commissioned rank have been:

Bob Moule (initial entry), Richard J Lee, Murray Baker, Ron Forsyth, J W Murphy, Bruce Chalmers and Barry O'Brien now a Commander and most likely the best remembered sportsman of the apprentices of HMAS NIRIMBA.

Officers of HMAS NIRIMBA who were in charge of Ordnance training were:

Lieutenant 'Rip' Cladding
Lieutenant P Ferguson
Lieutenant N Farmer
Lieutenant I Jones





Ordnance Artificer Apprentice
Barry O'Brien
Top Rugby Player - 1958

